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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 0172
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SUBJECT: MALAYSIAN ACADEMICS ON OIC, U.S. ISLAMIC POLICY,
AND AFGHANISTAN

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A September 10 seminar on the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) at Kuala Lumpur's International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS), a government-funded institute, was ostensibly about how the OIC could regain relevance, but also included supportive comments about POTUS's June 4 Cairo speech and questions about whether Islamic countries should become more involved in Afghanistan.
END SUMMARY.

OIC's Woes

¶2. (SBU) The September 10 seminar's main speaker, Abdullah al-Ashan, a Malaysian professor from the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), who was educated in Canada and the U.S., described what he called the rise -- 1966-1979 and decline -- since then -- of the OIC. Abdullah said that the OIC was established as "a response to Israeli aggression" and was initially filled with "jihadist spirit," which he and moderator Mohammad Hasim Kamali, founder of IAIS, took pains to explain did not mean warlike. Member states were initially united in their determination to keep Israel from "ignoring international norms," but the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Agreement was a major setback. Another blow to OIC credibility was its "naked" support of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war. Malaysia's 2003 chairmanship of the OIC could have been a bright spot, he said, but internal political issues had prevented Malaysia from focusing much energy on the OIC. Overall, nationalism within OIC member countries had eclipsed efforts to build the "Ummah," or trans-national Muslim community.

Cairo Speech

¶3. (SBU) Abdullah said that the U.S. approach to the Islamic world, especially after 9/11, was essentially an acceptance of Samuel Huntington's thesis in "The Clash of Civilizations," implying long-term hostility. But President Obama had "taken initiative" with his June 4 speech in Cairo. The OIC should try to support the speech's suggestions, such as establishing more university exchange programs, expanding academic programs on Islamic culture and U.S. relations with the Muslim world, and fighting polio. At the same time, the pro-Israel lobby in the U.S. would limit President Obama's ability to force Israel to follow UN resolutions and other international recommendations. Abdullah said his own experience and that of many other Islamic visitors to the U.S. showed that "U.S. society was never anti-Islamic," and it was also true that certain groups of Muslims, such as Pakistani MDs, were quite successful in the U.S.

Afghanistan

14. (SBU) While the Muslim world believed Palestine was the most important global issue, President Obama had declared Afghanistan to be most important to the U.S., Abdullah said. He asked whether the 80 seminar participants, mostly other academics, students and diplomats, thought the OIC could play a constructive role in Afghanistan, perhaps by replacing NATO troops with troops from OIC countries, whom the Taliban would not want to fight. Participants, starting with Pakistan's High Commissioner (Ambassador-equivalent) to Malaysia, described that suggestion as unworkable and naive. Moderator Kamali lamented that the OIC was not only absent in Palestine, it would most likely remain irrelevant for Afghanistan as well. Asked how Malaysia could help strengthen the OIC, Abdullah said Malaysia served best as an example of successful development.

KEITH